



JASON MOORE 2017-06-13

NAME THE SYSTEM! ANTHROPOCENES & THE CAPITALOCENE ALTERNATIVE

BIOPOLITICS,
ECONOFICTION

ANTHROPOCENE, BIOPOLITIK POSTMODERNER KÖRPER, CAPITAL, CAPITALISM,
CAPITALOCENE, MARXISM

The Anthropocene has become the most important – and also the most dangerous – environmentalist concept of our times. It is dangerous not because it gets planetary crisis so wrong, but because it simultaneously clarifies ongoing “state shifts” in planetary natures while mystifying the history behind them (Barnosky et al. 2012). No phrase crystallizes this danger more than the words *anthropogenic global warming*. Of course this is a colossal falsification. Global warming is not the accomplishment of an abstract humanity, the *Anthropos*. Global warming is capital’s crowning achievement. Global warming is *capitalogenic* (Street 2016).

The Anthropocene’s popularity derives from something more than impressive research. Its influence has been won on the strength of its storytelling power, and on its capacity to unify humans and the earth-system within a singular narrative. *How* it unifies earth-system and humanity within a singular narrative is precisely its weakness, and the source of its falsifying power. For the unification is not dialectical; it is the unity of the cyberneticist – a unity of fragments, an idealist unity that severs the constitutive historical relations that have brought the planet to its present age of extinction.

In the three years since my initial sketch of the Capitalocene (Moore 2013a, 2013b, 2013c), the concept has gone viral.[1] For me, the Capitalocene is partly a play on words. It is a *geopoetics* (Last 2015), a counterpoint to the Anthropocene’s extraordinary popularity. It is a means of cutting to the heart of the conversation initiated by Crutzen and Stoermer (2000). That conversation has been twofold (Moore 2017a, 2017b). One is an argument about stratigraphy. In this, the necessary criterion for designating a new geological era turns on a “geological signal” that “must be sufficiently large, clear and distinctive” on a global scale (Working Group 2016). This is the Geological Anthropocene. It begins, we are now told, at the mid-century dawn of the atomic age (Carrington 2016).

The Geological Anthropocene – a useful, “formal concept to the scientific community” – has, however, been eclipsed by the Popular Anthropocene: a way of thinking the origins and evolution of modern ecological crisis. This is debate joined by the Capitalocene – and the stakes are anything but silly (contra Chakrabarty 2016). The Popular Anthropocene poses several daunting questions: 1) What is the character of 21st century ecological crisis?; 2) When did that crisis originate?; and 3) What forces drive that crisis? That conversation, except for a brief moment in the 1970s (e.g. Meadows et al. 1972), was marginal until the new millennium.

Crutzen and Stoermer’s Anthropocene enjoyed the necessary virtue required of all Big Ideas – timing. It helped that the Anthropocene was one of those quasi-empty signifiers – like globalization in the 1990s – that could be filled with the aspirations and arguments of otherwise radically divergent thinkers (compare Steffen et al. 2007; Davis 2010). Quasi-empty, however, was not completely vacant. The Popular Anthropocene has worked not only because it is plastic, but because it fits comfortably with a view of population, environment, and history governed by food and resource use – and abstracted from class and empire (and not only class and empire).

If that sounds neo-Malthusian, it is. Not for its emphasis on population, but for ignoring modernity’s “special laws of population” (Marx 1967, I, 592) – human and non-human alike (e.g. Seccombe 1992; Weis 2013). In Anthropocenic thought, history is the first casualty; like Malthus in the eighteenth century, its major exponents substitute an abstract time for history, evacuating the very historical perspective that might give real explanatory flesh and blood to their quantitative reckonings. Among Malthus’s greatest errors was his inability to situate the late eighteenth century’s quite real combination of agricultural stagnation and population increase within longer waves of agricultural revolution and demographic change (see Moore 2010; Seccombe 1992, 1995).

The Capitalocene is therefore precisely *not* an argument about geological history (contra, e.g., Vansintjan 2015). For starters, the 'Age of Capital' necessarily precedes and precipitates the 'geological signals' necessary to discern a new geological era. That era – the Anthropocene – will outlast capitalism by a great many millennia. The biospheric conditions of the ongoing planetary "state shift" will shape the conditions of human organization for a very *longue durée* indeed.

The Capitalocene *is* an argument about thinking ecological crisis. It is a conversation about geo-history rather than geological history – although of course the two are related. The Capitalocene challenges the Popular Anthropocene's Two Century model of modernity – a model that has been the lodestar of Green Thought since the 1970s (Moore 2017a). The origins of modern ecological crisis – and therefore of capitalism – cannot be reduced to England, to the long 19th century, to coal, or to the steam engine. The Anthropocene's historical myopia, moreover, seems to be immanent to its intellectual culture. In this respect, the Capitalocene challenges not just the earth system scientists – but also those on the "other" side of the Two Cultures (e.g. Pálsson et al 2013; Brondizio et al 2016; McNeill and Engelke 2016) – *who refuse to name the system*. The Popular Anthropocene is but the latest of a long series of environmental concepts whose function is to deny the multi-species violence and inequality of capitalism and to assert that the problems created by capital are the responsibility of all humans. The politics of the Anthropocene – an *anti-politics* in Ferguson's sense (1990) – is resolutely committed to the erasure of capitalism and the capitalogenesis of planetary crisis.

The Anthropocene helpfully poses the question of Nature/Society dualism, but cannot resolve that dualism in favor of a new synthesis. That synthesis, in my view, rests on rethinking capitalism in the web of life. While it is now commonplace to invoke – quite properly – "system change, not climate change," we should take care with how we think that system. A critique of capitalism that accepts its self-definition – as a market or social system abstracted from the web of life – is unlikely to guide us helpfully towards sustainability and liberation. We should be therefore wary of views of capitalism reduced to their economic and social moments: the practice of "human exceptionalism" (Haraway 2008). Exceptionalisms are always dangerous; especially so when it comes to Humanity, a real abstraction active in a long history of racialized, gendered, and colonial violence (Moore 2016b, 2017a, forthcoming). The world-ecology conversation has argued the opposite: capitalism develops through the web of life. In this movement, human *sociality* has been brutally reshaped through Nature/Society as real abstractions, enabling modernity's successive racialized and gendered orders (Plumwood 1993; Moore 2015a; von Werlhof 1985).[2] This doubly-layered question of nature – as Nature/Society and as web of life – is fundamentally implicated in every moment and movement of modern history.

Finally, the Capitalocene embodies world-ecology's rejection of two frames that dominate environmental social science. On the one hand, it seeks an alternative to concept-indicator approaches characterized by influential metaphors such as the "ecological footprint" and the "metabolic rift." Such approaches conceptualize human organization – respectively markets and capitalism – independently of the web of life, then mobilize indicators of the "degree-of or amount-of" stress or degradation (Hopkins 1982, 201; e.g. Wackernagel et al. 2002; Foster et al. 2010). A relational approach, in contrast, follows part-whole movements in successive determinations and juxtapositions – through which the "whole" in question (capitalism, imperialism, industrialization, etc.) undergoes qualitative transformation (Moore forthcoming). This logic of inquiry opens analytical pathways that emphasize capitalism's extraordinary flexibility through its socio-ecological conditions. The Capitalocene argument consequently trods a different path from the governing procedures of global environmental change research: it is not a quest for "underlying [social] causes" of environmental change, nor for connecting "social organization" to environmental consequences (respectively, Brondizio et al. 2016; Dalby 2015).

On the other hand, in arguing that climate change, for instance, is capitalogenic, world-ecology argues *against* the view that climate change is sociogenic. That may seem a fine point. It is in fact anything but. The conflation of human *sociality* with Society is a conceptual move indebted to a long history of gendered, racialized, and colonial violence (Moore 2017a). The Capitalocene pursues a different approach, privileging a triple helix of environment-making: the mutually constitutive transformation of ideas, environments, and organization, co-producing the relations of production and reproduction (Moore 2015a; Merchant 1989; Worster 1990; Seccombe 1992). This challenges a vulgar materialism implicit in many global environmental change studies, for which ideas, culture, and even scientific revolutions have little traction – a problem besetting radical as well as mainstream accounts (e.g. Foster et al. 2010; Steffen et al. 2011). Even that, however, does not go nearly far enough:

"The challenge for us may then be to use descriptive tools that do not give to Capitalocene the power to explain away the entanglement of earthly, resilient matters of concern, while adding that no Capitalocene story, starting with the 'long sixteenth century', can go very far without being entangled with the on-going invention-production-appropriation-exploitation of... 'cheap nature'. In other words, we should not indulge in the very Capitalocene gesture of appropriation, of giving to an abstraction the power to define as 'cheap' – an inexhaustible resource that may be dismembered or debunked at will and reduced to illusory beliefs – whatever escapes its grasp" (Stengers 2015, 142; also Haraway 2016; Moore 2015a, 2016a, 2016c).

The Capitalocene, then, is a key conceptual and methodological move in rethinking capitalism as "a historically situated complex of metabolisms and assemblages" (Haraway et al. 2015, 21). This complex includes – but cannot be reduced to – capital's circuit of expanded reproduction. The concept's virtue, in relation to alternatives, is its historical-relational focus. Alternative naming has proliferated – a hopeful and positive indicator of flourishing discontent with the Popular Anthropocene. The equally ungainly terms offered as complementary, even alternative, to Anthropocene/Capitalocene frequently reveal innovative thinking. Some are

oriented towards Braudel's "very *longue durée*" (2009, e.g. Pyne's Pyrocene [2015]); others to modernity's phenomenal forms of production (e.g. Tsing's Plantationocene [2015]); still others to violent abstractions created by the past century's colonial developmentalism (e.g. Growthocene, Econocene [Chertkovskaya and Paulsson 2016; Norgaard 2013]). The argument that the Capitalocene elides the experience of Communist projects is framed by a concept-indicator epistemology – a surprising critique when offered by otherwise relational thinkers (e.g. Morton 2016). But the Capitalocene is a dialectical – not "generalizing" – claim (Moore 2017a, 2017b). In contrast to positivist generalization, dialectical arguments proceed *through*, not in spite of, variation. The Capitalocene names a historical process in Marx's sense of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall (1981): as a general law constituted *through* counter-acting tendencies. To what degree either the Soviet or Chinese projects represented a fundamental break with previous waves of capitalist environment-making is an important question but beside the point. The question is whether or not such partial moments overwhelmed the "developing patterns of history" established and reproduced in the capitalist world-ecology over the *longue durée*. [3]

A politics of nature premised on degradation rather than work renders the radical vision vulnerable to a powerful critique. This says, in effect, that pristine nature has never really existed; that we are living through another of many eras of environmental change that can be resolved through technological innovation (Lynas 2011; Shellenberger and Nordhaus 2011). Of course such arguments are rubbish. The counterargument – for the Capitalocene – understands the degradation of nature as a specific expression of capitalism's organization of work. "Work" takes many forms in this conception; it is a multispecies and manifold geo-ecological process. This allows us to think of technology as rooted in the natures co-produced by capitalism. It allows us to see that capitalism has thrived by mobilizing the work of nature as a whole; and to mobilize human work in configurations of "paid" and "unpaid" work by capturing the work/energies of the biosphere.

Human organizations are at once producers and products of the web of life, understood in its evolving mosaic of diversity. From this perspective, capitalism becomes something more-than-human. It becomes a world-ecology of power, capital, and nature (Moore 2003, 2011, 2015a, 2016a; Altvater 2016; Bolthouse 2014; Camba 2015; Cox 2015; Deckard 2015; Dixon 2015; El Khoury 2015; Gill 2016; Hartley 2016; Jakes forthcoming; Marley forthcoming; McBrien 2016; Niblett and Campbell 2016; Oloff 2016; Parenti 2016; Taylor 2015; Weis 2013; see World-Ecology Research Network, Essays). This incorporates geological history but does not substitute for it. World-ecology refuses naturalism and constructivism – not in favor a balance between the two but in pursuit of their transcendence. It incorporates geobiophysical processes *and* social and economic history within a relational field. That wider field is crucial. It allows world-ecology to situate the histories of culture and knowledge production, frequently excised from the historiography of capitalism (Moore 2015a, 193-217; 2017b; Hartley 2016). The Capitalocene therefore contests social as well as environmental reductionism, and resists any periodization of capitalism derived from the mythic category of Society (humans without nature). [4]

biographical sketch

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[1] I chart the genealogy of the Capitalocene elsewhere (Moore 2016b). The term originates with Andreas Malm. The use of the Capitalocene to signify capitalism as a system of power, capital, and nature is broadly shared with Haraway (2016). Haraway and I began experimenting with the concept independently before discovering each other in 2013.

[2] Real abstractions “are not mental categories that ideally precede the concrete totality; they are real abstractions that are truly caught up in the [socio-ecological] whole” (Toscano 2008, 274-75).

[3] It is difficult for me to read the Soviet project as a fundamental rupture. The great industrialization drive of the 1930s relied – *massively* – on the importation of fixed capital, which by 1931 constituted 90 percent of Soviet imports. The Soviets were so desperate to obtain hard currency that “the state was prepared to export anything and everything, from gold, oil and furs to the pictures in the Hermitage Museum” (Kagarlitsky 2007, 272-73). If the Soviet project resembles other modes of production, it is surely the tributary, not socialist, mode of production, through which the state directly extracts the surplus. Nor did the Soviets turn inwards after 1945. Soviet trade with OECD countries (in constant dollars) increased 8.9 percent annually between 1950 and 1970, rising to 17.9 percent a year in the following decade (calculated from Gaidar 2007, 14) – a trend accompanied by sharply deteriorating terms of trade and rising debt across the Soviet-led zone (Kagarlitsky 2007). Need we recall that the 1980s debt crisis was detonated not by Mexico but by Poland in 1981 (Green 1983)?

[4] Although this is how Malm (2016) uses it.

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